Hip-Hop Hope

He’s rap’s first openly gay artist, poised to make a much-hyped debut. Will Caushun throw it to the winds for AIDS?

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Among hip hop’s core fans -- young kids of color -- AIDS stats are rising faster than the profits on a new Jay-Z joint. But the genre’s record on AIDS has been, at best, inconsistent. Sure, Eazy-E used his deathbed as a platform to warn his homies and fans, TLC sang hauntingly about AIDS in the song “Waterfall” and Mary J. Blige and Lil’ Kim have been hawking lipstick for the MAC AIDS Foundation.

But can Caushun, the 23-year-old Brooklynite who has captured national media attention as hip hop’s first openly gay rapper, push the limit to bring the noise about blacks and HIV? “My whole presence in the hip-hop community revolves around my sexuality,” Caushun tells *POZ*. “I’m rhyming about my life as a gay black man. I couldn’t do that without talking about AIDS.”

On his way to becoming the nation’s premier queer lyricist, Caushun was a celebrity hairstylist for the likes of Jennifer Lopez, Carmen Electra and Rosie O’Donnell. His fate changed in the summer of 2000 when he began dialing a New York hip-hop radio station and intriguing hosts and listeners by identifying himself as the Gay Rapper, a name he has since trademarked.

Today, after snaring profiles in *Newsweek* and *Vibe* as well as the support of industry heavyweights such as Russell Simmons, Caushun is scurrying to lay the final tracks for his much-hyped freshman effort, *Proceed With Caushun*, and says he’s on the verge of inking a landmark record deal. But he’s still undecided over whether a song he wrote about taking HIV meds (Caushun is, by the by, HIV negative) will make the final track list. Many gay hip-hop artists, waxing rap-sodic beneath the media and industry’s radar for years, are skeptical about their breakout brother actually taking a stand on AIDS. “I wouldn’t rely on gay hip hop to address AIDS,” says Tim’m West, 29, HIV positive since 1999 and a member of the Bay Area rap group Deep Dick Collective (DDC). “Gay rappers don’t always feel a commitment to do that, because of the cliché.”

But West concedes that Caushun has potential. “I think he’s witty, funny and has a good flow.” The album is already full of lyrics sure to cause controversy -- rap’s essential ingredient -- like the “Gay Rapper’s D-Lite (I Want You),” which has Caushun trying to sex every rapper from Snoop Dogg to Jay-Z, and “Come Out (Gay Pride Anthem),” which begs closeted rappers to come to terms with their sexuality. Still, Caushun is conflicted about how to approach the A-word on wax without sinking his commercial viability. Are mainstream hip-hop heads ready for a queer rapper spewing

homoerotica and lamenting about dead homies lost to AIDS? “I’m not trying to be a gay messiah,” Caushun says. “I want to talk about AIDS in a way that’s natural. Hearing the statistics makes me want to be more creative and tactful in my delivery of the message, not just more adamant about getting it across.”

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